

## Theater: Not a 'Fun Home'; 'Two Boys' Trapped In DarkNet

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**FUN HOME** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**TWO BOYS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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**PUBLIC THEATER**

It's rather a shock to realize how poorly represented the stories of lesbians are in theater. That makes *Fun Home* -- the new musical based on the acclaimed memoir by Alison Bechdel -- all the more welcome and refreshing. The story is even more specific and unusual: Bechdel's autobiographical tale is about a gay daughter coming out in a world of increasing acceptance while her gay dad remains closeted and afraid. Culturally, here in the U.S., it's a strange sliver of time perhaps where a closeted father will watch his lesbian daughter announce herself to the world. In a wonderful sense, we may not see this like again. (Of course, we *will*, but it may become far less likely than it was in the past few decades. It wasn't possible really before the 1970s and won't perhaps be necessary in such traumatic terms in the future.)

Alison is a smart, creative girl growing up in Pennsylvania with her distant but loving and enigmatic father. He's a teacher at the local school, runs a funeral home and loves restoring their home to its antique glory. The place she grows up in is more like a museum than a home. As so often happens, the more removed her father becomes, the more he dominates the imagination, especially when the times he does engage are so interesting and vivid. Alison has a childhood engulfed by the mercurial needs of her father and is dimly aware of legal troubles surrounding his attention for local boys. She heads to college and comes out, only to have that trumped by her father as well: she finds out he's gay too and then weeks later while she's still absorbing this he's dead.



(A panel from Bechdel's acclaimed novel, *Fun Home*.)

As a child, Bechdel kept a journal about her life and she used that to make her novelistic memoir fresh and true. In this musical, Bechdel the artist is a constant presence as well. A desk is usually present onstage where she's crafting the images that will make up her graphic novel. The adult Alison (Beth Malone) comments on the action in the droll voice of her book: "Caption!" she'll declare before underlining the emotions in a scene or foreshadowing the future. Throughout we have the refined Sondheim-esque music of Jeanine Tesori and the complex, sometimes witty book and lyrics of Lisa Kron.

*Fun Home* the book is cool and removed as it analyzes her memories and her father from various stages in Bechdel's life. *Fun Home* the musical is more like her father: remote and hard to like. It's beautifully performed by a talented cast but the set design, creative decisions and above all the music do not do them or the material justice.

First, they made a conscious decision to avoid crafting a "graphic novel" look for this story. It's resolutely realistic, for the most part. Brief moments occur -- a few times we see a line being drawn across the set or a line on a page and later we get a flurry of panels as in a comic book -- but they feel out of place and distracting. So does the omnipresent desk and indeed the presence of the adult Alison (well performed by Beth Malone) who often has little to do and less reason to do it.

Fine, it won't be a dramatic nod to the story's origins as a graphic novel. But did the scenic design of David Zinn have to be so cluttered? Did they need a turntable set which for the most part serves little purpose and calls attention to itself in the otherwise low-tech surroundings? (His costumes are far better and generally spot-on.) The stage is generally a clutter, with the home they live in bulging with furniture and antiques and valuable knick knacks.

We get the idea easily but it pays dividends in one scene and one scene only: when Alison brings her girlfriend Joan (a wonderfully droll Roberta Colindrez) home, they enter the house and suddenly we see it from an outsider's perspective: it's not a jumbled mess of stuff but in fact virtually a museum quality display home of awe-inducing sophistication.

More often, we get clumsy moments like the kids sleeping on the floor of an apartment in New York who must stay in place when the scene has switched to another locale and finally sheepishly slip off stage. Where Bechdel's drawings are clear and precise in delineating time and space and the memories of the past from the actual past and so on, the stage production feels more like a yard sale with everything onstage scattered about to no purpose.

The bigger problem -- as with any musical that doesn't work -- is the music. I called it "Sondheim-esque," which I meant in the pejorative sense of arty fare that is vague and runs fearfully from strong melodies. That's not remotely true of actual shows by Stephen Sondheim: they're bursting with great songs. But people always associate his influence with the many people who

came in his wake that embraced his sophistication without grasping Sondheim's grounding in the great Broadway show tunes. Tesori's early breakthrough *Violet* was her best and most tuneful; she's gone downhill since, I'd say, whether it's the meandering tunes of *Caroline, Or Change* or her work here.

Clearly she has it in her to combine both high art and memorable tunes the way Sondheim did -- and the way Bechdel did with her work that uses the style of comic books to tell a subtle, complex tale with echoes of Joyce, Camus and so many others. We get glimpses of this at three points. First, an early toss-away number has the kids singing their own made-up commercial for the "fun home" (ie. funeral home) that their dad runs. Later, Alison has a dream that her childhood could be more like the boisterous clan of *The Partridge Family* and that leads to a 70s pop tune complete with mom, dad and her brothers all sporting goofy matching outfits a la the Partridges, Bradys, Osmonds and other family singing groups. Notably, neither song really advances the story but just provides a break and a welcome moment of melody.

The one song that truly combines everything it strives for in a moment of humor and sweetness is a song performed by the college-age Alison (Alexandra Socha) after she falls in love. In a very funny and touching number, she sings "I'm changing my major to Joan." She'll also minor in kissing Joan, by the way. Here is a moment that combines drama, humor, a great song and great acting; it's everything that *Fun Home* can and should be and rarely is.

Too often, it's a disorganized mess. Bechdel's dad might have liked the pretensions to high art but it would have been truer to Bechdel's vision if it had rejected that in favor of the clarity and humor the novel and that scene at college achieved at their best.

Needless to say, Michael Cerveris brings passion and a great voice to the troubled, distant dad. But it's an opaque character and without songs to illuminate his soul, Cerveris can do only so much. He's luckier than Judy Kuhn, who has the more thankless role of the mother, a woman who holds the family together but finds herself upstaged by her difficult, hard-to-please husband both in life and onstage. Joel Perez is quite good in various roles as the boys and men who catch the eye of Cerveris. And in a rare bit of luck, excellent casting by Jordan Thaler and Heidi Griffiths have produced child actors to play the brothers (Griffin Birney and Noah Hinsdale) that aren't annoying or cutesy but just get the job done with efficiency and humor.

But above all we have the three talented women who play Alison: Lucas is delightful in the very challenging role of young Alison, Socha makes the most of the richest and best written material as college age Alison and Malone brings some life to the narrator. One can't fault the talent on stage, just the choices made by director Sam Gold and scenic designer Zinn in bringing the fitfully successful musical by Kron and Tesori to life.

## **TWO BOYS \*\* out of \*\*\*\* METROPOLITAN OPERA**

I think any season at the Metropolitan Opera without a premiere of a new work (not just a re-imagining of a classic) is a sad season and wasted opportunity. So it's encouraging to say the least to see their bungled effort to commission a slew of new works finally bring forth some fruit in *Two Boys*, the **new opera by Nico Muhly** that had its world premiere in London and has been thoroughly reworked for its debut in New York. Muhly is the youngest composer to ever have an opera commissioned at the Met. His first work may be dramatically inert (the book is by Craig Lucas) but it has passages of beauty and will hopefully be the beginning of a fruitful relationship. How else are new operas to join the canon if no one is encouraged to write them? And how else can one get good at writing operas without...you know, writing them and seeing them staged and learning and growing and building on that for the next?

*Two Boys* was inspired by real events in 2001 but like most operas it feels like the distant past. In this case, it's a time when the Internet was new and many adults barely had a dim idea of how it worked or what a chat room was or realized that their teenage children might turn on a camera in their bedroom and start to disrobe for complete strangers around the world. Why, the parents would ask? Why not, the kids would answer?

You might call this *Catfish: The Opera* since it involves online deception. The story is framed like a police procedural. The impressively voiced Alice Coote is Detective Inspector Anne Strawson, a single woman who wants nothing to do with a case that involves a 16 year old boy stabbing a 13 year old boy. She's a single woman, looking after her ailing mother and still regretting the decision to give up her own baby boy in favor of a career. That boy would be a teenager now and dealing with kids brings up the painful issues she's tried to suppress all these years about the choices she's made and whether they're worth it. Coote has to shoulder the majority of the opera as well as perfunctory dialogue to explicate what's going on; it's a credit to her skills that the show remains as watchable as it is.

An even better reason for Anne not to take the case is that she's utterly computer illiterate and all the talk of chat rooms and online identities puzzles her to no end. She asks, pleads, cajoles and pushes 16 year old Brian (a compelling Paul Appleby in the night's best performance) to explain it all to her. She wouldn't believe him, he insists, and no wonder. His story begins as a lonely kid chatting up a teenage girl named Rebecca (a confident, charismatic Jennifer Zetlan) with the cloak of anonymity giving him the confidence this jock-ish lad otherwise apparently lacks. But that simple story of flirtation soon descends into a bizarre and absurd tale of a girl who claims her aunt is a spy, her genius little brother Jake is threatened, her family gardener is murderous and all their lives are in danger. Brian soon finds himself threatened by that secret spy Aunt Fiona and offered a job with presumably MI5 if he'll just kill Jake. Jake has incurable brain cancer anyway, he learns later, so it's not so big a deal. Brian will get a six figure salary and maybe a relationship with Fiona to boot.

The detective raises a skeptical eyebrow as this story unfolds but darned if transcripts from the chat room don't confirm this is exactly what Brian was told online. Exactly what is going on? And my god, could some of this actually be true?





That's the end to act one (where all the various revelations I describe have yet to be offered up). Audiences will have already leaped ahead to the obvious fact that the geeky 13 year old Jake is making it all up. Even the implausibly gullible detective says towards the end that surely Brian knew it was mostly or all lies. So the mystery of what precisely is going on isn't much of a mystery at all. That hardly matters since the real mystery in a good tale is often not whodunit but why they did it.

And this is where the show fails to come alive. We know people can be pushed and prodded into doing crazy things online but that's quite different from doing crazy things offline like bringing a knife to a mall and planning to stab another boy in the stomach while saying, "I love you, bro." Why is Brian is vulnerable? Is he not terribly bright? Is he just awkward around girls? Or is he trying to avoid acknowledging the possibility that he's gay?

(In a misjudged moment that confuses the issue further, the adult Appleby shares intimacy with the very young soprano Andrew Pulver in his bedroom. It should be a scene of two teenage boys fooling around but instead creates an air of pedophilia. The idealized version of Jake online -- performed well by the handsome Christopher Bolduc -- would have made more sense though it clearly might have muddied the waters between real life and fantasy. Still, better that than raising issues of molestation the show doesn't mean to include.)

And what's made Jake suicidal? His mother seems rather indifferent if loving -- Jake's real sister disappears for days at a time and mum seems nonplussed by it. But there's no indication of abuse or neglect that might make him despair of life. Of course we don't really need answers to these questions; we don't need *explanations*. But we do need characters that are complex enough to intrigue us and make us wonder. Here, there's barely a hint of these kids beyond their stereotypes. (Spoiler: the issue becomes even more urgent when we realize at the terrible moment when Jake dies that in fact he grabs Brian's hand and stabs the knife into himself. Will Brian suffer for a crime he might never have committed after all? It's an issue that remains unmentioned.) And Anne's personal trauma over the boy she gave up at birth and the mother she's trying to provide care for never really connects in any meaningful way to the case at hand.

Director Bartlett Sher cannot bring this to life but it is at least presented with clarity; the orchestra is led nimbly by conductor David Robertson. The set by Michael Yeagan, costumes by Catherine Zuber and lighting by Donald Holder all combine for a rather grim, grey appearance. (Much of the show is set in a police station, after all.) Yet presenting the internet in similar murky and scary terms feels rather reductive and tiresome. Surely the appeal of the internet for Brian and Jake is that it offers a world of seeming freedom and possibility? Wouldn't that contrast beautifully with the grey nature of their lives as they saw them? Instead, it feels more like a parental warning: internet bad! Similarly the choreography by Hofesh Shechter to symbolize the fluid, dangerous sexy wild west that is the internet felt rather forced. On its own the dancing was intriguing (and the principal dancer in particular held your focus) but it felt utterly out of place.

Then there's the music and libretto. Lucas may not have brought these characters to life. But he took the cliched language of the web and used it in inventive ways. The online chats proved especially conducive to duets. Muhly's music draws on many sources but wisely avoided any "modern" sound that might have attempted to sound futuristic. Indeed, the show's high point is the first time we enter into the internet. Muhly brilliantly goes back to choral music. The sheer beauty of voices singing in counterpoint wonderfully echoes the multiplicity of the web while harking back to religious music. The internet is the new god and we worship it.

Here for moments the visuals (courtesy of 59 Productions), staging by Sher, words by Lucas and music by Muhly combine to glorious effect. With a chorus whose faces are illuminated by the glow of laptops (an anachronistic but smart choice) and with numbers and text spiraling and dissolving like the DNA of this new universe being born right in front of our eyes, for a few minutes we see the allure of exploring this new territory. Questions of why and how disappear in the face of pure beauty.

**THE THEATER OF 2013** (on a four star scale)

*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2

*Picnic* \* 1/2

*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2

*Deceit* \* 1/2

*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*

*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2

*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2  
*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2  
*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel at Lincoln Center* \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*  
*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth w Alan Cumming* \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*  
*Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812* \*\*\*  
*Colin Quinn Unconstitutional* \*\* 1/2  
*A Family For All Occasions* \*  
*The Weir* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Disney's The Little Mermaid* \*\*  
*Far From Heaven* \*\*  
*The Caucasian Chalk Circle* \*\*  
*Somewhere Fun* \*\*  
*Venice* no stars  
*Reasons To Be Happy* \*\*  
*STePz* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Comedy of Errors* (Shakespeare In The Park) \*\*\*  
*Roadkill* \*\* 1/2  
*Forever Tango* \*\*\*  
*Monkey: Journey To The West* \*\* 1/2  
*The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson* \*\*  
*NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes* \* 1/2  
*NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream* \*\*  
*NYMF: Mother Divine* \*\*  
*NYMF: Julian Po* \*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Marry Harry* \*\*  
*NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist* \*\* 1/2

*NYMF: Castle Walk* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Crossing Swords* \*\*\*  
*NYMF: Bend In The Road* \*\*\* 1/2  
*NYMF: Homo The Musical* no stars  
*NYMF: Volleygirls* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Murder For Two* \*\*  
*Let it Be* \*\*  
*The Cheaters Club* \*  
*All The Faces Of The Moon* \*  
*Women Or Nothing* \*\* 1/2  
*Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play* \* 1/2  
*You Never Can Tell* \*\*\*  
*Romeo And Juliet* \*  
*Arguendo* \*\*  
*August Wilson's American Century Cycle* \*\*\*\*  
*The Glass Menagerie* \*\* 1/2  
*Lady Day* \* 1/2  
*Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse* \*\*\*\*  
*Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical* \*\* 1/2  
*Bronx Bombers* \* 1/2  
*Romeo & Juliet* at CSC \* 1/2  
*A Night With Janis Joplin* \*\*  
*The Winslow Boy* \*\*\*  
*Juno And The Paycock* \*\*  
*How I Learned To Drive* \*\*  
*Fun Home* \*\*  
*Two Boys at the Met* \*\*

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